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ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine* ®

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a NEW short story by

JACK RITCHIE

A new wrinkle in kidnaping—the world's entire supply of Red Intrepid tomato seeds. You say you don't believe it? Well, I'll tell you what we'll do . . .

Jack Ritchie's brand of humor is all his own—he really should patent it. By George, we think he could at that! It's so sui generis that he doesn't have to put his name on his stories . . .

THE SEED CAPER

by JACK RITCHIE

I studied the item I'd clipped from the newspaper last week. "Regan, we are going to kidnap five hundred pounds of tomato seeds."

He looked at me. "Tomato seeds?"

I nodded. "Regan, ours is a precarious profession, is it not? We have had our hairy moments, haven't we? Remember the A & C Supermarket? Here we dash out of the store with thirty-five hundred dollars only to find that we can't get our damn car started."

The memory of it pained Regan too. "The worst lemon I ever stole. Lucky for us that truck happened to pull up next to us."

"Yes. Nevertheless, fleeing in a Grandma's Homemade Doughnuts truck still rankles as one of the more embarrassing moments of my life. And there have been other incidents, have there not? The point I'm making, Regan, is that eventually our luck will run out if we continue our present line of operations."

Regan agreed. "But still what else is there? Supermarkets are just about the best thing going for us these days."

"Listen," I said, and began reading the clipping. "The J. C. Swenson Seed Company announces that its experimental farm

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has produced a new hybrid tomato, the Red Intrepid, which it claims is completely superior to anything yet developed in the field. It is a medium-sized fleshy fruit, smooth and of bright red color, with a unique sweet flavor. It is not subject to cracking and uneven ripening at the shoulders, and is completely resistant to fusarium wilt.

"Mr. Swenson, president of the company, reveals that the Red Intrepid is the result of ten years of experimentation. Only five hundred pounds of Red Intrepid seeds will be available for sale this year. The Red Intrepid will be listed in the J. C. Swenson spring catalogue. The seeds are expected to sell for seventy-five cents per packet, or \$5.00 per one-half ounce."

Regan was impressed. "That's a lot of money for half an ounce of tomato seeds."

"Exactly. And extending that, one ounce should sell for ten dollars, and one pound for one hundred and sixty dollars, and five hundred pounds for *eighty thousand dollars*. Of course, that figure is retail and does not allow for probable discounts for purchases of more than one-half of an ounce. Nevertheless, I do think that it would not be at all unreasonable if we demanded \$10,000 for the return of the seeds—especially considering that they are the result of ten years of work and apparently, at the moment, the world's entire supply of the Red Intrepid."

Regan scratched his neck. "If the seeds are worth so much, why kidnap? Couldn't we just plain steal?"

"There would remain the problem of converting them to cash. We could not dispose of them in bulk—certainly all seed houses and commercial growers would be alerted—and I simply cannot picture myself sorting tiny seeds into thousands of packets and peddling them from door to door. No, we will kidnap the seeds."

"Wouldn't the seeds be pretty well-guarded?"

I smiled. "Regan, who in the world would be crazy enough to kidnap tomato seeds?"

We went to our car, and I drove Regan out to a hill overlooking highway 57 and its junction with county trunk C.

I parked on the shoulder of the road. "There it is, Regan. The J. C. Swenson Seed Company. Like most seed houses, it is located in a rural area."

Regan studied the layout. "There are about twenty cars parked in the lot."

I nodded. "The automobiles of the employees. However, they

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need not concern us. We will strike after closing hours. I've driven by here a number of times in the last few days and I've noticed that after five o'clock the only car down there is a battered sedan and I imagine that it belongs to the night watchman."

"How do you know they still got the seeds? Maybe they're sold out."

"Yesterday I dropped into the company's office to ask for their spring catalogue. I learned that the edition had not yet been mailed to prospective customers, but I was given a copy. And while I was there, I asked one of the office girls if I could buy a packet of Red Intrepid seeds and she informed me that the seeds were still in their bulk containers. They had not yet been packaged."

"All right," Regan said. "So the seeds are still there. Now how do we work the caper?"

"Late tonight we will enter the rear of the building. We will tie up the watchman and transfer the seeds to our car. After we get away, we will contact Mr. J. C. Swenson and make arrangements for the transfer of \$10,000 from him to us. It is as simple as that."

It was nearly one o'clock the next morning when Regan and I drove back to the J. C. Swenson Seed Company. The battered sedan was the only car in the lot.

We parked and slipped on our masks. Regan got to work on the rear door of the warehouse and in a matter of minutes we were inside. We found ourselves among numerous stacks of bags, some of them reaching to the ceiling.

Regan whistled softly. "Are all of them tomato seeds?"

"I doubt it. Probably peas and beans and corn and so on."

The huge warehouse was dimly lit by single bulbs here and there. Regan and I proceeded cautiously down the aisles.

We came upon a young man seated at a battered desk, eating a sandwich and poring over one of several thick books before him.

Regan stepped forward with his drawn gun. "Take it easy and nobody gets hurt."

The night watchman put down his sandwich and raised his hands. "You're wasting your time. The company deposits all its cash at the bank daily. The safe is empty."

"I am not interested in the safe," I said. "Lead me to your tomato seeds."

He blinked. "Why?"

"Never mind why. Just show us."

He shrugged and led us back through the aisles to another section of the building. We entered a medium-sized room containing bins, boxes, and more stacked bags.

"There they are," he said. "Tomato seeds."

"Which are the Red Intrepids?"

"I don't know, but the bags have labels."

Regan and I found the Red Intrepids after a five-minute search. The seeds were in twenty-pound cloth bags.

"You don't mind me asking what you're doing?" the watchman asked.

"Not at all," I said. "As a matter of fact, I would like you to pass the information on to Mr. Swenson. We are kidnaping the Red Intrepid seeds and we demand \$10,000 for their safe return."

The night watchman stared at us for some moments. "Suppose Mr. Swenson won't pay the ten thousand dollars?"

I put menace into my chuckle. "In that case we will charter an airplane and scatter Red Intrepid seeds to the four winds. Come autumn, there will be a bootleg harvesting of field-sown Red Intrepids from one corner of this state to the other."

We utilized the services of the watchman to carry the bags out to our car. When we were through, we took the watchman back to his desk. Regan produced a rope and began tying him to a chair.

"One other thing," I said. "Swenson is not to bring the police into this. If he does, we will immediately dispose of the seeds."

I picked up the open volume on the desk. It appeared to be a textbook. "Ah," I said. "A college student? Working your way through school? What is your major?"

"Botany," he said, "With emphasis on horticulture. How will Mr. Swenson get in touch with you?"

"We will phone him sometime during the day."

"Mr. Swenson is in the hospital," the night watchman said. "I don't know which one, but he got banged up in an auto accident. Both legs broken."

I thought that over. An obstacle, but a minor one. "What is your name?"

"Ingram. Joseph Ingram."

"Are you in the telephone book?"

"No. But I live with my parents. The William Ingolds. They have a phone."

"Good enough. We will use you as our intermediary. You find Swenson and talk to him and then we'll talk to you."

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Regan and I drove back to our motel and got some sleep. In the morning we explored some country back roads until we found an abandoned barn, where we unloaded our bags of seeds in a dry corner.

In the afternoon I went to a public phone booth, looked up the Ingram number, and dialed. Young Ingram answered the call.

"Have you passed on our information to Swenson?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Tomorrow morning I want you to put ten thousand dollars into a plain paper bag. You will drive the East-West free-way for approximately twenty miles and take the Amesville off-ramp. You will deposit the package in the tall grass at the first arterial stop sign you see."

"Yes, sir. And where will I find the seeds?"

"I'll phone you about that later. And remember, only one of us will pick up the money. The other will be watching from a safe distance. If anything, *anything*, goes wrong, he will immediately dispose of the seeds. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The next morning, Regan and I flipped a coin and I lost.

I drove our car to the pickup point and found the package. As I drove back toward the city, I glanced frequently at my rear-view mirror, but as far as I could tell I wasn't being followed.

After a while I turned into a motel and rented a room. I phoned Ingram and told him where to find the seeds. Then I sat down and waited.

If the police had been watching me, they would be closing in soon. In the event they did, I would not, of course, betray Regan to them. And neither would he have betrayed me if he had lost the toss of the coin.

But the time passed and the police did not come.

At noon I drove to our motel and rejoined Regan.

We divided the money equally and Regan kissed his share. "I'm going out and pick up that sports coat I saw at the shopping center."

While he was gone, I packed our suitcases. The job seemed to have gone perfectly, but I always prefer to put distance between us and the site of the latest caper. I thought the West Coast would be fine this time of the year.

When I finished, I made a drink and switched on the TV set. I caught the middle of a news broadcast and soon I found a TV re-

porter interviewing J. C. Swenson. I recognized him from his picture on the catalogue. And he was standing. On two perfectly good legs.

I frowned.

"Yes," Swenson said, "The thieves—or kidnapers—definitely knew what they were doing."

I smiled.

"Did you recover the seeds?"

"Yes," Swenson said. "We found them in two places—an abandoned barn and under a tree in Kaminski ravine."

Under a tree? Kaminski ravine?

"How much was the ransom money?" the reporter asked.

"\$100,000."

I sat up. \$100,000?

Swenson continued. "They were extremely selective in the flower seeds they took. Our entire stock of North Ainu Vinca. Some seven pounds. That particular species is on the endangered list, you know. And all six pounds of our Bangladesh Gypsophilia. Extremely rare. It has the distinctive fragrance of mashed bananas. And all eighteen ounces of our Romanian Terre-verte Dictamnus. A collector's item. And three pounds of—"

The reporter interrupted him. "All together, how much was stolen?"

"Some ninety-two pounds of almost irreplaceable flower seeds." Swenson seemed puzzled. "They also took five hundred pounds of Red Intrepid tomato seeds. I just can't figure that out. So bulky, I mean. Proportionately not nearly as valuable as its same weight in flower seeds."

I realized that my mouth was open and closed it.

Swenson answered another of the reporter's questions.

"Well, they just burst into the warehouse, locked my night watchman in a storeroom, and kidnaped the seeds."

Locked him in a room? Hell, no, we had tied him to—

I closed my eyes. I saw it all now. We had tied Ingram to the chair. He had, of course, managed to free himself after we left. Perhaps in a matter of minutes. Then that horticulture freak had loaded his car with those damn exotic seeds and taken them off to some safe hiding place. That done, he returned to the warehouse, locked himself in a storeroom, secreted the key, and waited until the firm's employees arrived for work in the morning.

I picked up the phone and dialed Ingram. He answered.

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I had difficulty speaking. "I respect honor among thieves, but in this case I will make an exception. I am going to send an anonymous note to the police."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Ingram said. "I'll tell the police that you were my accomplice."

"Ha," I said, "You don't even know my identity."

"True," he said. "But I have your fingerprints. I would turn those over to the police."

I sneered. "I am very careful about where I leave my fingerprints. The only surface I remember touching is the rear doorknob and I wiped that clean before we left."

His voice sounded as though he were smiling. "Do you remember picking up my botany textbook? You left fingerprints on that loud and clear."

I hung up and doubled the bourbon in my second drink.

Regan came back, pleased with his new sports coat. "Yes, sir," he said happily, "That was the smoothest, neatest job we ever pulled."

I stared at him. Should I tell him?

Hell, no.

We got into our car and headed for the West Coast.

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